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Andrew Smith

College of DuPage

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The "Construction" of the American Indian in the Early National Period [U.S.]

by Andrew Smith

(History 2820)

Ann Durkin Keating, in her book *Rising Up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago*, states, "Without a doubt, the fur trade led most non-Native people into Indian Country [of the western Great Lakes]" and "[as of 1785], the fur trade had been an integral part of the western Great Lakes for more than a century" (23-24); indeed, for "the French and British periods in the western Great Lakes, . . . [the] fur trade fostered a rich Indian Country" (16). In her focus on the life of British fur trader John Kinzie (1763-1828), Keating argues, "Kinzie was part of a majority at Chicago who wished to see Indian Country maintained" (18), as Kinzie, and the other non-natives like him, had established a mutually beneficial relationship of trade with the Indians of Indian Country, often including marriage to Indian women and starting families with them. For the Americans, though, Keating said the Northwest Ordinance of 1787—which created the first organized territory of the United States, the Northwest Territory, covering present-day Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and northeastern Minnesota—"assumed that the U.S. government would be acquiring Indian land and turning it into real estate. To do so would replace the diverse mix of native and non-Native settlements that constituted Indian Country with farmers and settlers" (33). About her book, Keating says, "Most centrally, the book is concerned with the transfer of the western Great Lakes from Indian to American control through a combination of treaties and military conquest" (16). In conjunction with treaties and military conquest, a specific "construction" of the Indian was created by Americans to rationalize and facilitate the processes of displacing Native Americans out of Indian Country – or killing them outright – in order to acquire their land.

Evidence of the "construction" of the Indian can be seen even in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. In a list of "facts" proving the king of Great Britain's desire for "the establishment of absolute tyranny" over his American colonies, the 27th and final piece of evidence listed states, "He [the king] has excited domestic insurrections amongst us [colonials], and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions." This short sentence reveals the "construction" of the Indian was already well under way in North America by 1776. In portraying the Indians as *merciless*, they are constructed as cruel, with no capacity for mercy, including all of the Christian connotations of the word *mercy*. By characterizing the Indians as *savages*, the Indian is constructed as animal – read: not human. In describing the Indians' "rule of warfare" as "undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions," the Indian is constructed as immoral, especially by contrast to white-European sensibilities about war.

Another piece of evidence that the Indian was being "constructed" as cruel, animal, and immoral by white Americans can be seen in a corollary construction: the Indian Hater. Edward Watts, professor of English and American Studies at Michigan State University, said, "The story of the white man who transforms from pursuing a personal vendetta to slaughtering all Indians was a very popular trope between the [U.S.] Revolution [1775-1783] and the Civil War [1861-1865]" (qtd. in Hall xiii). Based loosely on actual frontiersmen who lived during the eighteenth-century, Watts said, "the Hater story was told by [a wide range of writers, including] Charles Brockden Brown in the 1790s [Brockden being the most important American novelist before James Fenimore Cooper in the 1820s]" (qtd. in Hall xiii). According to Watts, that wide range of writers during the 1790s "told strikingly similar stories, indicating a narrative often recycled in the oral culture of the frontier" (qtd.

in Hall xiii). The existence of the Indian Hater narrative – prior to and including the 1790s – was a corollary to the construction of the Indian as cruel, animal, and immoral, and acts as evidence of the prior construction of the latter: in order to construct the “Indian Hater narrative,” one first needs to construct an Indian that produces the need for – and justifies – an Indian Hater.

This construction of the Indian as cruel, animal, and immoral would serve the nascent United States during its first three decades. Keating says, “[First U.S. President] George Washington [in office 1789-1791] fully supported the acquiring of Indian land and turning it into real estate for farmers and settlers” (33). Keating notes, “Populations continued to expand into... [the Northwest Territory]. These settlers demanded that the U.S. government protect their interests. President Washington helped to organize a U.S. Army whose purpose was to protect... American settlers” (33). Independent historian Gillum Ferguson, author of the book *Illinois in the War of 1812* published by University of Illinois Press, said, “In 1812, the Illinois Territory... had about 12,000... [settlers] in it” (“Illinois”) and “was on the verge of explosive [settler] growth..., but first the public lands [of the Illinois Territory] had to be put on sale and the Indians removed” (14). Kerry Trask, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin Manitowoc, said, “After 1822, ...white people swarmed into the [Illinois Territory] region” (3), and, with them, a “pattern of violence that had been repeated again and again... since the very beginning of the English encounter with America” (4). Trask links the “construction” of the Indian as cruel, animal, and immoral to that beginning:

Fear of the “other,” and fear of what they themselves might become in the New World wilderness, drove Englishmen to lash out in angry violence against the native people, making Indian war a defining characteristic of the Anglo-American colonial experience, and resulting in... [the First Indian War of 1675-78] becoming, as... historian [Richard Slotkin] observed, “the archetype of all the wars which followed.” (4)

Trask says the early United States’ “ideological self-image” was a mask of sorts:

On the one hand, there were the human and life-affirming republican values with their strong emphasis on human rights and personal freedom, all of which had been the primary justification for the [U.S.] Revolution. On the other, there were the powerful imperialistic drives and ambitions and a seemingly insatiable appetite for new territory, usually acquired by armed aggression with little regard for the rights and interests of the continent’s indigenous people. (5)

Trask’s observation brings up an interesting aspect of the “construction” of the Indian, and, by corollary, the Indian Hater: a psychological one. Herman Melville, in his ninth and final novel, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, satirizes how Americans preserved this “ideological self-image” Trask refers to – through the “construction” of the Indian as cruel, animal, and immoral, and through its corollary construction, the Indian Hater – by portraying those constructions as necessary and justified. In the novel, Melville has the confidence-man character repeat a story told to him by his father’s friend, a judge, to satirize the “construction” of both the Indian and the Indian Hater:

The backwoodsman is... a thoughtful man. He is strong and unsophisticated... If in straits, ...he must depend on himself... The backwoodsman is not without some fineness to his nature... the backwoodsman... [is a] captain in the vanguard of conquering civilization... Pathfinder, provider of security to those who come after him, for himself he asks nothing but hardship. (ch. 26)

Here, Melville is satirizing the “construction” of the Indian-hating frontiersman as a noble, almost holy, man. By contrast, Melville also has the confidence-man relay the story of the judge telling how the frontiersman “constructs” the Indian for the benefit of frontiersman’s own son, and, by extension, the confidence-man is “constructing” the Indian as cruel, animal, and immoral for the overwhelming majority of American readers who live far from the frontier, back east: “In youth the backwoodsman... hears little... but histories of Indian lying, Indian theft, Indian double-dealing, Indian fraud and perfidy, Indian want of conscience, Indian blood-thirstiness, Indian diabolism” (ch. 26).

Reflecting on the “construction” of the Indian going all the way back to the First [U.S.] Indian War of 1675-78, Trask invokes Melville’s own phrase to describe that construction: “the metaphysics of Indian Hating” (qtd. in Trask 4). From 1675 on, Trask says the “construction” of the Indian as cruel, animal, and immoral “persisted in the very identity of white America, perpetuated and made stronger by the frequent shedding of Indian blood and the constant retelling of heroic tales ... amid... the continent’s wild regions against the monstrous savages” (Trask 4). Watts provides evidence that the “construction” of the Indian – and of its corollary, the Indian Hater – persisted over the next century and a half: “In the decades after the War of 1812, dozens of versions of the [Indian Hater] story would appear in print... [Writers Flint, Hentz, Paulding, Irving, Snelling, Bird, and Bennett, among others] all celebrated [Indian] Haters as doing the necessary dirty work of clearing the forest of savages, usually aided by ‘Providence,’ an assumption of divine blessing. (qtd. in Hall xiii).

It’s clear that “constructing” the Indian as cruel, animal, and immoral – and its corollary construction, the Indian Hater – both rationalized and facilitated the process of white Americans displacing and killing Native Americans for the Indians’ land, land that was needed for individual concepts of “freedom” which white Americans aspired to, or as the result of the more structural causes – as Trask frames it, “the powerful imperialistic drives” (5) – of capitalism. Smith 7

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